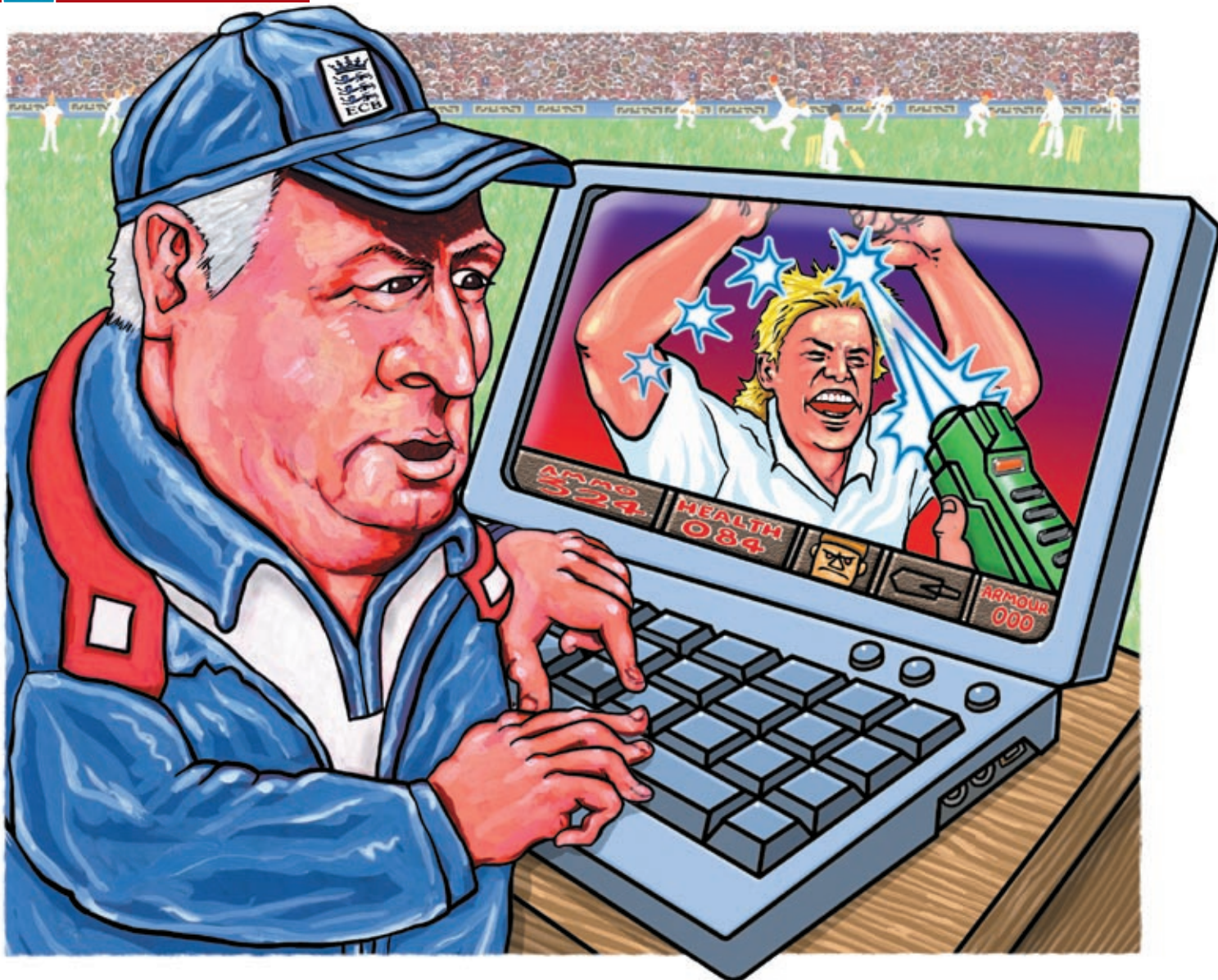




MACBITER

As the nights draw in and the first frosts of the season appear, MacBiter's thoughts naturally turn to the sound of willow on leather and the vital question: was the England cricket coach playing Doom during the Ashes?

The tumult and the shouting have died away, though the afterglow of victory remains. The trophies have been stashed and the scorebooks closed. The losers have returned home to be offered the traditional silk cords of honourable suicide and the winners have at last sobered up. So now the greatest Ashes series in living memory has taken place and its results are a matter for the history books, we can at last weigh up the individual contributions in a thoughtful manner, and ask the vitally important questions:

What kind of computer did the England team use? What software

were they running? And what part did it play in their victory?

LAPTOP SPIN

Don't tell me they didn't have one. Half the time, when nothing much was happening and it wasn't time for an ad, one of the cameras would track lazily across the front of the dressing room, hoping to catch a glimpse of the off-field players as they either awaited their turn to bat or hung around uselessly, having already batted. At time likes these, the lens would alight on England coach Duncan Fletcher posed in front of what was obviously a laptop, studying

the screen with broody intent. Sometimes other players would pass to and fro behind him, and occasionally one of these would pause, eye the screen and make some (sadly inaudible) comment before passing on.

The purpose of this laptop was never explained, nor was it much commented on – which was rather surprising, since down below in the van Simon Hughes was surrounded by enough hi-tech graphical analysis kit to fit out a Type 42 destroyer's attack centre. Most of the analyses he offered up were to the point, like explaining reverse swing, or why Kevin

Pietersen found it so easy to hammer anything a bit short into the Thames; but sometimes I felt the 'analysis' was a bit desperate and I was always surprised when nobody asked Hughes – and he didn't volunteer – the purpose of Duncan Fletcher's laptop.

BALL TAMPERING

Now I can see the point of hi-tech aids in the planning sessions before a match. "Gather round, lads. Here is a series of clips of Glenn McGrath. Notice how he scratches his balls before he starts his run-up? I'll freeze frame – there – and you can see what he's up to. Thank you, Freddie, we'll save the jokes till later if you don't mind. Now we've analysed this and it turns out that when McGrath does this, nine times of ten it means he's going to bowl the good-length reverse-swing slightly slower delivery, pitched just outside off stump with a bit of topspin to make it cut back. So when you see him worry his wedding tackle, that's the kind of ball you're going to get. Questions?"

I can also see the point of computer use after a match, when all those tiresome and nerdy statistics



can be keyed in and afterwards displayed in database form, following any parameters you like. Examples: which bowler conceded the most extras on a Sunday? Who reached a century with the fewest number of fours and sixes? What field placings worked best against Adam Gilchrist when Flintoff was bowling down-sun and the temperature was 24 degrees celsius or lower? A decent laptop could make mincemeat of these queries, and even put them up as a pretty 3D graphic if that's what turned Fletcher on.

But actually during the match? How on earth can a computer help?

There are several theories to account for this mystery. The first is that Duncan Fletcher simply didn't trust the match scorer to keep proper account of what really went down, and was in fact duplicating the latter's efforts, with a few extra fields of his own such as "crap shot", "lousy ball", "he's toast!" and so on as a sort of personal ball-by-ball aide memoire, that could be dissected and used in future matches.

The second theory is that Fletcher was actually writing emails, probably to the Home Office whingeing about his passport application, but did so in clear view of the world's cameras because the wily Zimbabwean wanted to freak the Aussies out.

Now it's fair to say that we Pommies regard the Aussies as a great and vigorous people, though perhaps a little protean. We think of them as tall, golden, muscular, brave and

cheerful, totally dedicated to and excellent at all manner of outdoor sports. We do not – and if this is unkind, I can only apologise – associate them with cerebral activities such as reading books and operating computers. The latter are cold-climate pastimes, but the Aussies do not by any means live in a cold climate and their tastes are far more physical. One

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can imagine Ponting, Gilchrist and co being made uneasy by the sight of a computer apparently being used to control a cricket match. At least it would be worth a try.

LARA CROPPED

A further possibility is that Fletcher is totally hooked on Brian Lara Cricket and was trying to improve his personal results. That stone face you saw was evidence that his personal results at Brian Lara Cricket weren't what he hoped they would be.

It is an intriguing possibility that Fletcher's utter failure to crack Brian Lara Cricket explains, to some extent, why he never dumped some of the more conspicuously under-achieving players. His failure excused their failure. He couldn't sack them because they'd only averaged 26 all series,

when his own average score in the far less testing environment of Brian Lara Cricket was actually only 16, which anybody walking past could see at a glance. I picture the under-achievers in the England side thanking Heaven for Brian Lara Cricket. And of course it would still fulfil Theory 2 (above), inasmuch as it might still fool the anxiously watching Aussies into

thinking some hi-tech Pommy trick was about to be played on them.

But of course, it might not have been anything to do with cricket. Modern laptops can be used for a variety of tasks, including video and the management of photo collections. The last time I saw that particular shade of gloom on a man's face, he was looking at a photo album of his own family and I just wonder – it's only a wild hunch – if that isn't what Fletcher was doing.

After all, at that stage there wasn't much else he could do, was there? He's not in direct touch with the players, he can't give any more advice except at drinks time by proxy, his hands are not on the game. It seems only reasonable that he might consider editing his photo collection a little. Or maybe contacting his broker

to buy shares in Wormwood Bats. Or playing Doom. Or browsing eBay for some presentation zircon earrings for the noble Kevin Pietersen. Or maybe just sitting there looking at the screen idler, that being pleasanter than watching Steve Harmison struggling to get a length at Old Trafford.

WELL WARNE CLICHÉ

So there you have it: we may never know what was on Duncan Fletcher's laptop screen during those tense weeks during which white-clad heroes grappled in immortal combat and the raucous cry of "Aw – nice one, Shane!" echoed in many a welkin across the land. Did it play a real part in victory, was it a psychological ploy to spook the Aussies, was Fletcher catching up on his office work, or was its purpose purely recreational? For the time being, these things are hidden from us.

And to revert to the original question – what kind of computer was it? I have no idea. Can anybody identify the machine – the lid was up and sometimes lids have logos. And if anybody has actual information about which application was running, then let him not hesitate a moment before forwarding the information to me. I shall make the best possible use of it, you may be sure.

I feel we have a right to know these things. 

CONTACT

MACBITER

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iPOD, iPHONE, I DESPAIR

I wish I could get more excited about Apple's two most recent offerings, the iPod Nano – otherwise known as the Singing Credit Card – and the iPhone or whatever the new all-white Apple-Motorola mobile is called.

My spies in London tell me about one in three of all Tube travellers can be seen listening to MP3 players of one flavour or another during their journeys. They seem to accept this is normal – one of my friends told me he only wears his iPod in order to shut out the muffled roar of 30 other iPods all going at once – and I have no doubt Apple is delighted, but to me it seems horrifying.

I have never liked walking around attached to a piece of kit. Walkmen were bad enough, Bluetooth Earrings from Hell are frankly ludicrous, but iPod use seems to go with a certain vacant inhumanity of facial expression which tells the observer that the user is far, far away. It is not a good idea to be far, far away in public. You'll never hear the footpad creeping up on you, and if you step rashly into the road all the warning shouts in the world won't save you from being splattered by a taxi. An undercover cop's bellow of "Armed police! Stop!" will go quite unregistered, with the result that... well, we all know the result: seven bullets into the skull, and six points on your licence.

Now this ubiquitous gadget has re-emerged in a smaller lighter form. It is only a matter of time before it gets so small and light that it can be worn on the ear; another variety of the Earring from Hell to pollute the visual environment.

PHONE OF CONTENTION

The phone is even crapper. Oh, I'm sure it's a nice phone, as phones go, but surely the whole point of an iPhone ought to be the ability to download iTunes

directly from the ITMS without going anywhere near a computer. Use the phone part to facilitate the iTunes part. Well, no. It seems that although the iPhone will play iTunes, you still have to download these via USB from a computer talking to the web. So it's nothing special, just a phone that will play music, rather than a phone that will acquire music. A missed opportunity, chaps.

Other than these gadget upgrades, there has been nothing new from Apple lately – apart from the famous case of the developer Intel Macs being shipped out under heavy embargo to chosen software companies, with the predictable result that within 24 hours video clips were appearing on the web showing the Intel-ised Mac OS running sweetly on a standard Wintel box. Apple shut this operation down as swiftly as it might, but the genie is now out of the bottle and the stage is set for the upcoming confrontation between Windows and the Mac OS for the same hard disk space. Not this year, perhaps not next year, but the year after that. Then we'll see who wins this long war.

